GRASSROOTS JOURNALS
ISSN 2564-212X
05(02) | December 2025

JOURNAL OF POLICY & GOVERNANCE
Published by The Grassroots Institute, Canada
Website: http://grassrootsjournals.org/jpg

M – 00599 | Analytical Article

Whispers in the Forest: The Enigmatic "Little People" of Indigenous Lore

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ABSTRACT

This article pragmatically explores the cultural significance of the Little People in Indigenous lore, focusing on how these figures embody the values, beliefs, and environmental interactions intrinsic to Indigenous communities. Through an interdisciplinary methodology that encompasses qualitative data gathered from oral histories, ethnographic studies, and existing folklore analyses, this research uncovers the societal functions attributed to these enigmatic beings. Findings reveal that the Little People serve as custodians of ecological knowledge, embody moral teachings, and function as mediators between the human and natural worlds, reflecting a deep-seated respect for nature. These insights have discernible implications for healthcare, suggesting that integrating Indigenous narratives and ecological perspectives into modern health practices may enhance community well-being and mental health outcomes. By acknowledging the importance of these cultural figures, the research highlights the potential for harmonizing traditional Indigenous knowledge with contemporary healthcare approaches, thus advocating for a more holistic understanding of health that honors the interconnectedness of culture, environment, and well-being. The study ultimately calls for the incorporation of Indigenous folklore into health education and policy-making, recognizing its value in fostering cultural competence and improving health equity in Indigenous populations. The aim of this research is to explore the cultural significance and interpretations of the Little People in Indigenous lore, addressing the key issue of how these figures reflect the values, beliefs, and environmental interactions of Indigenous communities; this will require qualitative data from oral histories, ethnographic studies, and analyses of existing folklore to illuminate the societal functions and meanings attributed to these enigmatic beings.

Keywords: Indigenous folklore; Little People; Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK); Cultural health frameworks; Human-environment relationships; Holistic Indigenous well-being

Received: 29 October 2025
Reviewed: 14 November 2025
Accepted: 30 November 2025
Published: 31 December 2025

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How to cite this paper: Orcherton, D. F. (2025). Whispers in the Forest: The Enigmatic "Little People" of Indigenous Lore. *Journal of Policy & Governance*, *05*(02), 131-156. https://doi.org/10.33002/jpg050205
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1. INTRODUCTION

Historically and contemporaneously, folklore and Indigenous folkways have served not only as a narrative medium but also as a vessel for cultural identity, communal values, and ecological knowledge in Indigenous societies. Among these narratives, the stories of the "Little People" resonate deeply, embodying a spectrum of teachings and moral frameworks that govern the relationships between human beings and the natural world. These enigmatic figures vary widely among distinct Indigenous cultures, often interpreted as guardians of ecological wisdom or embodiments of spiritual lessons, contributing to a rich tapestry of oral traditions that underscore the interconnectedness of culture and nature. Despite the significance of these narratives, there remains a notable gap in existing academic discourse regarding the multifaceted roles that the "Little People" play in Indigenous lore, particularly concerning their implications for contemporary ecological practices and mental health outcomes (Onyima, 2016a; Saber and Sassine 2022; Swiderska et al., 2022, p. 113).

LITTLE PEOPLE LORE
CUSTODIANS OF ECOLOGICAL KNOWEDGE
• Embody values and bellers
• Cherish a deep respect for nature
MORAL TEACHINGS
Qualitative data collected from oral histories, ethnographic studies and folkiore analyses
MEDIATORS of the HUMAN AND NATURAL WORLDS
Societal functions revealed through interdisciplinary research:
serve as mediators between the human and natural worlds
HEALTHCARE IMPLICATIONS
• Enhance community-well-being and mental health outcomes
• Integrating Indigenous narratives and ecological perspectives into health practices
• Advocating for a holistic understanding of health
MEDIACARE for HUMAN AND NATURAL WORLDS

Figure 1: Perspectives of Little People in Indigenous Lore. Source: OpenAI (2025). *Little People Lore* [AI-generated infographic]. ChatGPT (image generation). Unpublished.

This research seeks to address this void by investigating the cultural significance and interpretations of the "Little People" within various Indigenous communities and how these interpretations can enhance modern health practices by fostering a holistic understanding of well-being that incorporates environmental stewardship (Congretel and Pinton, 2020. p. 527-543; Turner et al., 2022, p. 627-651). The primary objectives of this study include analyzing the ecological knowledge embedded within the narratives of the "Little People", exploring their societal functions across different Indigenous cultures, and examining their potential integration into contemporary health care strategies. By grounding this inquiry in qualitative data from oral histories and ethnographic studies, as well as in relevant folklore analyses, the research aims to illuminate the prevailing themes that emerge from the study of human interactions with these beings (Colvin et al., 2019, p.73-91; David-Chavez, 2024; Zidny et al., 2020, p. 145-185). The importance of this exploration extends beyond academic realms; practically, it serves as a call to integrate Indigenous wisdom into modern health frameworks to improve community

well-being and mental health outcomes, especially within Indigenous populations. In recognizing the intricate relationship between culture and ecology, as illustrated by the narratives surrounding the Little People, this work advocates for an interdisciplinary approach that embraces both Indigenous knowledge systems and contemporary scientific understanding, thereby enriching both fields (Eriksen et al., 2014, p. 1288-1303; Pullin and Knight, 2009, p.19; Winschiers et al. ,2010, p. 243-255).

Ultimately, this work endeavors not only to contribute to scholarly dialogue but also to promote cultural competence and improve health equity in diverse communities, underlining that narratives of the past can inform and enrich our paths forward (Michalopoulos & Xue, 2021, p. 1993-2046; Nawrath et al., 2023; Skubel et al., 2019;). In this context, the insights gained from visual representations, such as those depicted in related images, can further emphasize the cultural significance of these narratives. For instance, imagery showcasing Indigenous interactions with nature or traditional practices which can ground the theoretical discussions in tangible expressions of cultural heritage, highlighting the importance of storytelling in fostering ecological awareness and resilience.

1.1. The Little Bobcat And His Mother: A Yurok Immersion Story

In the heart of the redwood forest where the Klamath River sings to the trees, a little bobcat was born under the protection of the ancient ones (Figure 1). His mother, wise and patient, was a keeper of the old ways — guardian not only of her cub but of the forest stories whispered in the wind.

Figure 2: Ilklustration of the Yurok Immersion Story. Source: OpenAI (2025). *Little People Lore* [AI-generated infographic]. ChatGPT (image generation). Unpublished.

The little bobcat was curious. He pounced on shadows, chased birdsongs, and often wandered too far. One morning, while chasing a dancing leaf, he lost sight of his mother. Panicked and alone, he called out, but only the rustling leaves answered. From the trees came a soft voice, not in English, but in Yurok, the language of his ancestors. It was his mother, calling to him in words that wrapped him like a warm blanket:

“Nek’ shoy-no-k’wo’” ("Come back to me, my child").

When he returned to her side, she didn’t scold. She knelt beside him, just like in the illustration, and told him a story: about the time when animals and humans spoke the same language, when the bobcat was known as a watcher of the land, and when children were taught not just how to survive, but how to belong. As they sat in the hush of the forest, the mother continued to speak in Yurok, about the names of the trees, the stars, and the river spirits. The little bobcat listened. That day, he learned more than words; he learned who he was, where he came from, and why it mattered.

1.2 Themes & Purpose

This story is an immersion piece meant to revitalize Indigenous language and story-telling traditions, teaching children the values of:

- Listening to Elders
- Staying close to family and tradition
- Learning through story
- The sacred relationship between animals, land, and people

Figure 2 shows not only a moment of motherly care but the passing of cultural knowledge, a visual metaphor for language transmission, identity, and rootedness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout recorded history, folklore has served as a crucial vehicle for the transmission of cultural identity and moral paradigms within Indigenous communities, encapsulating their worldviews, values, and spiritual beliefs. Among the myriad figures populating these rich traditions, the enigmatic "little people" stand as a compelling subject of study, resonating across various Indigenous cultures. This elusive characterization, often described through diverse lenses ranging from mischievous woodland spirits to benevolent guardians, evokes intrigue not only for the narratives themselves but also for what they reveal about the broader societal relationships between humans and nature within Indigenous cultures (Onyima, 2016a). The significance of researching these figures goes beyond mere academic curiosity; the continued relevance of little people tales today illustrates the urgency to understand Indigenous perspectives in contemporary environmental discourse (Saber and Sassine, 2022). Particularly, these stories provide insight into cultural reverence for the natural world and underscore Indigenous practices of land stewardship that contrast sharply with prevailing extractive paradigms in modern society.

Various studies have explored the role of the little people in oral traditions, highlighting themes such as their function as mediators between the human and spirit realms, their connection to the land, and their moral teachings (Swiderska et al., 2022, p. 113; Turner et al., 2000, p. 627-651). Scholars have noted that these figures often embody the duality of nature; while they can be sources of wisdom and protection, they can also serve as warnings against human hubris (Congretel & Pinton, 2020, p. 527-543). The literature points to the localization of such myths in specific geographic and cultural contexts, suggesting they are not merely universal archetypes, but reflections of the ecological communities and challenges faced by different Indigenous populations (Zidny et al., 2020, p. 145-185). Yet, despite these foundational insights, the explorations of little people lore remain somewhat fragmented. A comprehensive analysis that assimilates various cultural perspectives and seeks to elucidate the reasons behind the persistence and evolution of these stories across generations is notably lacking in the existing scholarship (Colvin et al., 2019, p. 73-91). Moreover, while there is valuable literature focused on the stories themselves, there remains a dearth of interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate feminist, ecological, and postcolonial frameworks to deepen understanding of these complex narratives (Eriksen et al., 2020, p.1288-1303; Thomas et al., 2018). Additionally, with the increasing urgency of ecological crises, the relevance of little people myths as vehicles for instructing sustainable interactions with the environment warrants further exploration, particularly through contemporary lenses (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2013, p. 243-255).

Eminent scholars like Pullin et al. (2013, p. 19-19), Orcherton (2023; 2011), Miriti et al., (2023) allude to the necessity of integrating modern narratives with traditional lore, highlighting the potential for these stories to inform current debates around Indigenous rights and environmental ethics. Furthermore, the impact of globalization and digital media on the transmission and interpretation of these stories presents an important area for future inquiry. As Indigenous peoples navigate modernity, understanding how their folklore adapts and thrives in new contexts can provide insights into cultural resilience (Michalopoulos & Xue p. 1993-2046; Skubel et al., 2019).

This literature review aims to synthesize existing research on the little people of Indigenous lore, elucidate their cultural significance, and identify pressing gaps that signal a need for further interdisciplinary exploration. By doing so, the review will set the stage for a more nuanced appreciation of the interplay between folklore and contemporary Indigenous identity — and, ultimately, highlight the enduring wisdom embedded within these mystical tales (Göcke, 2018, p. 17-29; Gordon, 2018, p. 136;

Guldi & Armitage, 2014; Miriti et al., 2023, p. 5-18; Nawrath et al., 2023; Sepie, 2017a, p. 78-78). The exploration of the Little People in Indigenous lore reveals a rich tapestry woven through historical narratives and cultural beliefs. Early references to these enigmatic beings were often intertwined with the understanding of nature as a dynamic and inhabited space. Indigenous accounts from various tribes illustrate a profound connection to the forest, where these figures were perceived as guardians of the land, reflecting the deep ecological knowledge held by Indigenous peoples, as shown in the works of Onyima (2016a) and Saber and Sassine (2022). As the discourse evolved, scholarly interpretations during the late 19th to early 20th centuries began to categorize these folklore elements, often neglecting the nuanced meanings assigned by Indigenous cultures.

This period, characterized by a growing focus on ethnographic documentation, saw researchers like Swiderska et al. (2022, p. 113) emphasizing the importance of oral traditions in preserving these narratives, yet sometimes misrepresenting their spiritual significance. Transitioning into the late 20th century, a more holistic approach emerged, recognizing the vibrancy of Indigenous voices and the integral role of Little People within cultural identity and storytelling. Scholars such as Congretel & Pinton (2020 p. 527-543) and Turner et al. (2022, p. 627-651) examined these figures not merely as folklore but as vital components of social and spiritual frameworks, asserting their relevance in contemporary Indigenous identity. Furthermore, recent works, including those by Zidny et al. (2020, p. 145-185) and Colvin et al. (2019, p. 73-91), emphasize the ongoing reverberations of these narratives in contemporary environmental movements, reflecting a resurgence of Indigenous cultural pride and activism that roots itself in these time-honored tales. The chronological development of this topic demonstrates a shift towards acknowledging the complexity and significance of Indigenous lore, particularly in relation to their interpretations of the natural world (Mistry and Berardi, 2011).

The exploration of Little People within Indigenous lore unveils a rich tapestry of cultural significance and varied interpretations. Central to this phenomenon is the theme of nature and its interconnectedness with human narratives. Scholars like Onyima (2016a; 2016b), Orcherton (2024) and Saber and Sassine (2022), elucidate how these diminutive figures often serve as guardians of the forest, highlighting Indigenous respect for nature and ecology. This perspective aligns with findings from Swiderska et al. (2022, p. 113), who argues that the stories surrounding these entities emphasize moral lessons that reflect the values of coexistence and environmental stewardship prevalent in many Indigenous cultures. Another significant aspect within the literature is the function of "Little People" as cultural symbols that promote community cohesion and identity. Congretel & Pinton (2020, p. 527-543) and Turner et al. (2022, p. 627-651) underscore that these figures often embody the spiritual beliefs and collective memory of a people, offering a framework for understanding their place in the world. The dual role of these beings as both protectors and tricksters, as suggested by Zidny et al. (2020, p. 145-185), further complicates their significance, allowing for varied interpretations depending on the context in which they are invoked.

The role of storytelling in preserving these narratives cannot be underestimated, with scholars like Colvin et al. (2019, p. 73-91) and Thomas et al. (2018) noting the oral traditions that have sustained the lore across generations. These narratives serve not only as entertainment but as vital conduits for imparting cultural knowledge and fostering intergenerational relationships. Collectively, these themes weave a complex understanding of Little People, making it clear that they are more than mere folklore; they are integral to the identity and worldview of Indigenous communities, as emphasized by Eriksen et al. (2020, p. 1288-1303) and Winschiers-Theophilus et al. (2020, p. 243-255).

The exploration of the enigmatic little people in Indigenous lore has been approached through a variety of methodological lenses, each contributing unique insights into this multifaceted phenomenon. Ethnographic methods, for instance, have proven indispensable in uncovering the cultural significance and varied interpretations of little people across different Indigenous communities. By employing participant observation and immersive fieldwork, researchers have documented oral histories that illuminate how these entities serve as cultural markers of identity and values within Indigenous narratives (Onyima, 2016a; Saber and Sassine, 2022). Conversely, historical analysis has been utilized to trace the evolution of beliefs surrounding little people, revealing shifts influenced by colonization and modernization (Swiderska et al., 2022, p. 112; Turner et al. (2022, p. 627-651). This method facilitates an authorial understanding of how these figures have been appropriated or misinterpreted in Western contexts, with some scholars arguing that the diminutive stature of these beings often reflects broader themes of marginalization and otherness (Congretel & Pinton, 2020, p. 527-543). Moreover,

interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating aspects of folklore studies and environmental anthropology, have enriched the discussion by linking little people to ecological knowledge and environmental stewardship practices (Colvin et al., 2019, p. 73-91; Zidny et al., 2020, p. 145-185). These perspectives highlight not only the symbolic role of little people as guardians of the forest but also their function as agents of ecological awareness and conservation within Indigenous worldviews.

Despite these advancements, some methodological approaches have faced authorism[1] for either oversimplifying the complexity of Indigenous beliefs or failing to engage meaningfully with Indigenous perspectives (Eriksen, 2014, p. 288; Thomas et al., 2018). Thus, an authorial blend of these diverse methodologies reveals a more nuanced understanding of the little people, inviting ongoing dialogue within the academic community (Michalopoulos & Xue, 2021, p. 1993-2046; Pullin et al., 2013, p.19; Winschiers-Theophilus and Bidwell, 2013, p. 243-255). The convergence of methodological frameworks ultimately fosters a richer comprehension of how these "whispers" in the forest continue to resonate within Indigenous cultures. The exploration of Indigenous lore surrounding the Little People illustrates a convergence of theoretical perspectives, significantly enriching the discourse on folklore and mythology.

Postcolonial theory offers an author-centered analytical lens for examining how Indigenous narratives from the Pacific Islands, Canada, and Papua New Guinea articulate both resistance to colonial and neocolonial structures and adaptation through cultural continuity and innovation. In these diverse contexts, Indigenous authors reclaim storytelling as a sovereign act — reinscribing language, land, and identity into the literary and oral tradition. Whether expressed through the revitalization of Itaukei *Talanoa* in Fiji (Nabobo-Baba, 2006), the assertion of sovereignty in First Nations literature in Canada (Simpson, 2017), or the reimagining of *kastom* in Papua New Guinea (Mel, 1995), such narratives serve not only as expressions of cultural resilience but also as political interventions that challenge imposed histories and affirm Indigenous worldviews (Smith, 2012). Scholars such as Onyima (2016a) and Orcherton (2023) emphasize how the tales of Little People serve as a means of cultural preservation amidst colonial pressures, while others like (Saber and Sassine, 2022) and Swiderska et al., 2022, p. 113) highlight the role of these figures in articulating Indigenous worldviews and ecological knowledge. In contrast, psychological frameworks suggest that such folklore addresses communal fears and societal norms. The interpretations of Little People as embodiments of the unknown allow for an understanding of how communities navigate the anxieties associated with nature and the spirit world (Congretel & Pinton, 2020, p. 527-543; Turner et al., 2022, p. 627-651). Furthermore, sociocultural theories reinforce the notion that these stories foster intergenerational connections, with Zidny et al. (2020, p. 145-185) asserting their significance in formative identity development within Indigenous youth. Ethnobotanical approaches also contribute to this multifaceted discussion, as the Little People are often linked with specific ecological practices and flora, creating a bridge between mythology and practical knowledge (Colvin et al., 2019, p. 73-91; Thomas et al., 2018). By integrating environmental narratives, researchers such as Eriksen et al. (2014, p. 1288-1303) provide evidence that folklore can encapsulate vital ecological teachings that are vital for sustainability. Additionally, feminist theories draw attention to the gender dynamics often present in these mythologies, with Winschiers-Theophilus et al. (2013, p. 243-255) discussing how female representations of Little People challenge traditional gender roles within Indigenous cosmology. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives enrich the understanding of the Little Peoples significance, demonstrating their complexity in cultural identity formation and ecological interrelations within Indigenous communities.

The exploration of the enigmatic little people in Indigenous lore reveals a rich tapestry of cultural meanings that extend far beyond mere folklore. This literature review summarizes compelling insights drawn from various studies, underscoring their relevance in understanding the intricate relationships between Indigenous cultures and their environments. The narratives surrounding little people serve as vital conduits for cultural identity, encapsulating important moral teachings and ecological wisdom that advocate for coexistence and stewardship of the natural world. Scholars such as Onyima (2016a; 2016b) and Saber and Sassine (2022) highlight these figures as both guardians of the forest and embodiments of Indigenous values, reflecting a profound ecological understanding and community cohesion.

[1] Within a literary or philosophical context, *authorism* may refer to the belief in or emphasis on the authority of the author over a text's meaning. It contrasts with theories like Roland Barthes' *"The Death of the Author,"* which argue that readers—not authors—ultimately determine a text's meaning. In this sense, authorism is the privileging of the author's intentions, biography, or identity in interpreting literary works (Barthes, 1977)

Furthermore, the duality of little people as protectors and tricksters emphasizes the complexity of these narratives and their contextual interpretations within specific Indigenous cultures, as illustrated by Congretel & Pinton (2020, p. 527-543), Swiderska et al. (2022, p. 113) and Turner et al. (2019). While the current scholarship has broadened the discourse surrounding little people by integrating various theoretical frameworks, it remains clear that engagement with these narratives can have broader implications for contemporary discussions surrounding environmental ethics and Indigenous rights. The revival of Indigenous cultural pride and activism, as noted by Colvin et al. (2019, p. 73-91) and Zidny et al. (2020, p. 145-185), signifies the continued relevance of these tales as tools for collective resilience and empowerment in addressing ecological crises. They illuminate how Indigenous perspectives can inform modern environmental movements and contribute to pressing debates around sustainability and ethical stewardship, which is echoed in the call for interdisciplinary approaches outlined in this review. However, limitations within the existing literature should be acknowledged. The scholarship on little people often remains fragmented, lacking comprehensive studies that synthesize diverse cultural perspectives. While some researchers have effectively employed ethnographic methods to capture the oral traditions that perpetuate these myths (David-Chavez, 2024), the fragmentation persists, reflecting a need for a more unified approach that addresses the complexities and localized meanings of little people stories across different Indigenous cultures. The integration of feminist, ecological, and postcolonial frameworks remains inadequate, as pointed out by Eriksen et al. (2020, p, 1288-1303) and Winschiers-Theophilus & Bidwell (2013, p, 243-255), indicating a fertile ground for future researchers to expand upon these existing studies.

Looking ahead, several areas warrant further investigation. Future research could benefit from a focused examination of the impact of globalization and digital media on the transmission of little people narratives. As Indigenous communities adapt their folklore to navigate the contemporary landscape, understanding these dynamics may provide deeper insights into cultural resilience (Pullin & Knight, 2009, p, 19-19) and the ongoing evolution of Indigenous identity. Furthermore, interdisciplinary frameworks that encompass environmental anthropology, folklore studies, and feminist critique could yield richer, multifaceted understandings of how narratives of little people articulate indigenous worldviews and their ecological implications (Michalopoulos & Xue, 2021 p. 1993-2046; Skubel et al., 2021). In conclusion, the exploration of little people within Indigenous lore is not simply an investigation into myth but a profound inquiry into the cultural identities, moral paradigms, and environmental ethics embedded in these narratives. By reaffirming the connection between folklore and the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, this literature review illuminates valuable pathways for further exploration that can contribute significantly to both academic discourse and the field of environmental studies. The whispers in the forest, represented by these tales, invite dialogue and reflection, urging us to engage deeply with the wisdom and teachings they sustain through generations (Göcke, 2018, p. 17-29; Gordon, 2018, p. 136; Guldi & Armitage, 2014); Miriti et al., 2023, p. 5-18; Nawrath et al., 2023; Sepie, 2017a, p. 78-78).

2.1 Legends of the Little People Across Indigenous Cultures

2.1.1. North America

• *Crow Nation – Nirumbee (Awwakkulé)*

The Nirumbee, also known as Awwakkulé, are fierce dwarf-like beings said to inhabit the Pryor Mountains of Montana. In Crow belief, these Little People are spiritual powerhouses. Though fearsome in appearance, they play a central role in imparting visions, dreams, and medicine knowledge to the Crow People. Warriors and vision-seekers would often journey to the mountains to pray and fast, hoping for guidance from the Nirumbee — who are believed to shape destinies and influence tribal affairs from the spirit realm.

• *Muskogee (Creek and Seminole) – Este Lopocke or Este Lubutke*

In Southeastern Indigenous traditions, these "Dwarf Beings" are described as small but physically powerful, living in hollow trees or rugged cliffs. Este Lopocke are spiritual intermediaries, most often encountered by medicine people, who are guided by them in locating healing herbs. Despite their small stature, they command deep respect and are viewed as protectors of plant knowledge and natural balance.

• *Choctaw – Kowi Anukasha*

The Choctaw speak of the Kowi Anukasha, which translates roughly to "Forest Dwellers." Standing about two or three feet tall, they inhabit caves hidden under large boulders. While sometimes portrayed

as mischievous or even abductors of children, their role varies. In some stories, they are protective and wise, while in others they serve as warnings about straying too far from community or values. These beings represent both mystery and moral lessons within the Choctaw cosmology.

2.1.2 Oceania

• *Hawai'i – Menehune*

The Menehune are among the most well-known little people legends in Oceania. Described as diminutive, nocturnal master builders, they are said to have constructed fishponds, roads, temples, and irrigation ditches — all in a single night. Their craftsmanship is unmatched, but they disappear before sunrise, rarely seen by human eyes. The Menehune symbolize hidden ancestral skill and industriousness, as well as a deep connection to the sacred landscape.

• *Fiji*

Ethnographers in Oceania and elsewhere often hear talk about ghosts and mythical little people who have great strength and magical qualities (Orcherton, 2023; Tomlinson, 2016). Two analytical temptations are to dismiss talk about such figures as delusional or to see them as tokens of an expansively defined "hauntology" He writes about Fijian ghost stories and talk about *veli,* mythical little people, and offers an analysis of them as alternative perspectives on the morally marked relationship between past and present. Ghosts are a socially disconnected subclass of spirits that mark suffering and loss. *Veli* (and other autochthonous spiritual figures) are signs of indigenous strength that endures and can win out, even as their non-Christian associations make the promising power, they offer also somewhat dangerous (p.1).

• *Papua New Guinea*

In the diverse and highly complex cultural landscape of Papua New Guinea, particularly in East New Britain Province, stories of "Little People" occupy a significant space in Indigenous cosmologies and oral traditions. Among the Tolai, Baining, and Sulka peoples, there are recurring narratives of small, elusive forest beings, often described as ancestral or spirit-related entities, who inhabit sacred places like caves, dense forests, and volcanic landscapes. These beings are commonly linked with tambu (sacred) knowledge and are believed to serve as guardians of taboo areas or transmitters of spiritual power. They are neither wholly benevolent nor malevolent but often serve as cautionary figures to children and outsiders, teaching respect for cultural boundaries and the environment (Guthrie, 2017; Hermkens, 2013). In East New Britain, such beings are also intertwined with kastom (custom) and the broader indigenous ontology in which spirits, ancestors, and natural features are interconnected (Figure 3). Some local accounts describe Little People as watchers of ritual practices or as beings that can grant wisdom or retribution, depending on human behavior. Their presence reinforces the relational worldview held by many Papua New Guinean societies, where spiritual and physical worlds overlap, and where unseen entities play a vital role in sustaining social order and cosmological balance (Hermkens, 2013; Kuehling, 2005). As these stories are passed down through oral storytelling, initiation rites, and ritual performances, they not only serve to educate younger generations but also help maintain a deep-seated connection to land, ancestry, and traditional authority.

• *Indigenous (Aboriginal) Australia*

Across the Australian continent, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities recount stories of "Little People" — supernatural beings often described as knee-high, hairy, and emitting a strong or pungent odor. These entities, known by various regional names such as the Nargun in Gunai/Kurnai traditions of southeastern Australia or the Mimih spirits in the rock escarpments of Arnhem Land, play a vital role in shaping cultural landscapes and spiritual relationships to country. While their behaviors can range from mischievous and playful to aggressive and punitive, they are not considered mythical in a Western sense, but rather real spiritual presences that must be respected and acknowledged (Berndt and Berndt, 1999; Morphy, 1991).

The Mimih spirits, for example, are said to inhabit rock crevices and cliff faces in Arnhem Land and are known for their thin, fragile forms and elusive nature. According to Kunwinjku people, they were the original beings who taught Aboriginal people how to hunt, cook, and live properly (Taylor, 1996). Similarly, the Nargun is believed to reside in caves behind waterfalls and punishes those who violate sacred laws, particularly young people who trespass into restricted spaces (Reed, 1993). These beings often serve as custodians of sacred sites, acting as enforcers of Aboriginal Law (Lore) and caretakers of ecological and spiritual balance. Their stories reinforce the interconnectedness between humans, spirits,

and the land, where harm to the environment or disregard for sacred customs invites supernatural consequences, while reverence and reciprocity ensure harmony and protection (Rose, 1996).

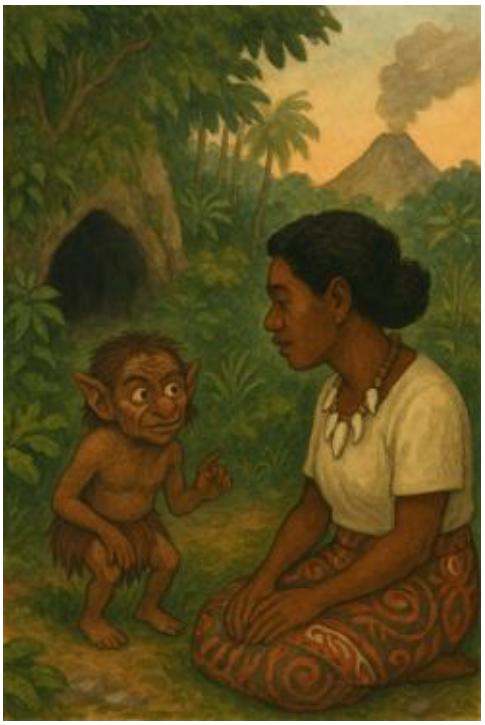

Figure 3: East New Britain Little People (Papua New Guinea). (Source: OpenAI, 2025a).

These narratives are central to cultural transmission and land stewardship, often taught to children through story, song, and ceremony. Far from being superstitions, tales of Little People function as moral frameworks that instill respect for Country, reinforce gendered and age-based knowledge boundaries, and guide appropriate behaviors in relation to sacred geography. In doing so, they embed Indigenous ecological knowledge and legal systems within everyday experience and spiritual understanding (Langton, 2000).

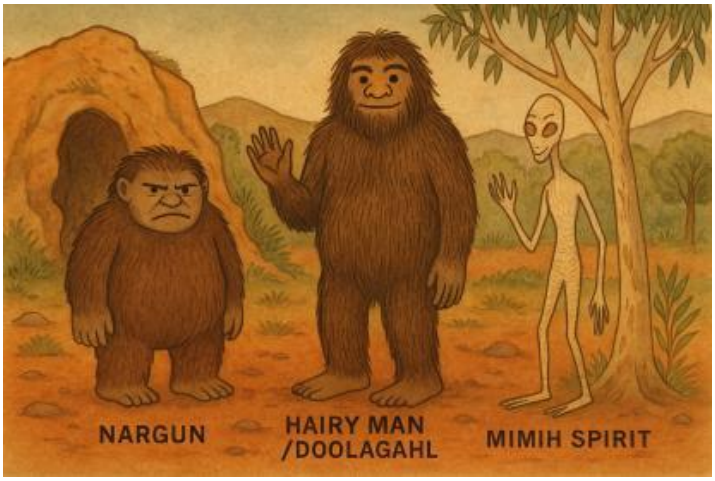

Figure 4: Little Guardians of Country: Spirit Beings from Aboriginal Lore. Source (Open AI, 2025b)

2.1.3 Asia

• Taiwan Indigenous Peoples – Various Tribes

According to Charette (2020), Taiwan is home to 16 officially recognized Indigenous tribes, many of which have unique folklore involving "little people" or forest spirits. These beings often serve as guardians

of ancient traditions and are deeply connected to sacred natural sites, reflecting the tribes' spiritual and cultural ties to the land.

2.2 Little People in Peru and Other Regions of South America

South America is a land teeming with rich traditions, mythologies, and deeply rooted beliefs passed down from ancient civilizations such as the Inca, Mapuche, and numerous Amazonian tribes. One particularly intriguing and enduring component of this folklore is the concept of "little people" — mystical, often elusive beings who are said to inhabit remote forests, mountains, and caves across the continent. From the misty Andes of Peru to the jungles of Brazil and the islands of Chile, stories about these tiny creatures persist, blending indigenous spirituality with a complex web of moral and social values. Little people in South American legends often serve as guardians of nature, tricksters, or even omens. They occupy a liminal space between the human and supernatural world, revered and feared in equal measure. These beings play essential roles in cautionary tales, often used to teach lessons about respecting the natural world, the dangers of greed, or the importance of moral behavior.

These narratives continue to shape the cultural landscapes of rural communities and are sometimes even acknowledged by contemporary South Americans, especially among indigenous populations. This article explores some of the most iconic little people in Peruvian and broader South American folklore, shedding light on their roles, characteristics, and the lasting impression they've left on local cultures.

The Muki of the Andes (Peru)

The Muki stands as one of the most iconic and enduring figures in the folklore of the Peruvian Andes. Known throughout the highland mining regions, this small, dwarf-like being is often depicted with a short stature, pale face, deep-set eyes, and a high-pitched voice. His name, “Muki,” derives from the Quechua word *muqi*, meaning “moist” or “damp,” referencing his preferred habitat: the humid, dark mines deep beneath the earth (Faries, 2018). The legend of the Muki is deeply embedded in Andean mining culture, symbolizing the mysteries and dangers of the subterranean world. Miners often share tales of encounters with this elusive creature, who is believed to have the power to either bless them with rich mineral veins or lead them to peril, depending on their behavior and offerings. These stories serve not only as cautionary tales but also as a means of preserving cultural identity and conveying the values and beliefs of the mining communities.

Characteristics and Role

According to miners, the Muki resides in subterranean tunnels where he is both protector and punisher. Some say he guards the wealth of the earth, precious metals and gems, and will reward those who show him respect and generosity. Others believe he can be malevolent, punishing greedy or disrespectful miners by causing accidents or cave-ins. These dual traits of being both benevolent and dangerous make the Muki a complex figure of reverence and fear.

Cultural Interpretations

In many stories, the Muki makes pacts with miners, offering riches in exchange for a part of their soul or other offerings. These tales often carry moral undertones, cautioning against greed, exploitation, and unethical behavior. The Muki also serves as a metaphor for the dangers miners face daily, personifying the perilous and unpredictable nature of their profession (Gow, 2005). Many anthropologists argue that the Muki legend functions as a psychological coping mechanism for miners working in hazardous environments, giving a face to the otherwise impersonal dangers of their work (De la Cadena, 2010).

Chullachaqui: The Forest Trickster (Peru/Amazon Basin)

Another legendary little person from Peruvian and Amazonian folklore is the Chullachaqui. This creature, often described as a dwarf or short forest dweller, is infamous for his trickster nature. The Chullachaqui is said to have one normal human foot and one twisted or animal-like foot, making his footprints easily distinguishable in the jungle.

Tales and Appearances

The Chullachaqui is known for shape-shifting and luring people deep into the forest by appearing as a familiar person, often a friend or family member. Once deceived, the person may become lost forever or fall under a magical spell. These tales are especially common among tribes like the Shipibo and Asháninka in the Peruvian Amazon (Brown and Fernández, 1991). In some versions of the myth, the Chullachaqui is a forest guardian who punishes those who harm nature or animals. In others, he's a neutral trickster who tests the cleverness and moral integrity of those who encounter him.

Symbolic Role in Society

The Chullachaqui serves multiple roles in Indigenous cultures. Symbolically, he represents the unknown and the often-dangerous wilderness of the jungle. His stories serve as a caution to respect nature and to be wary of appearances. In a psychological sense, he embodies the fear of isolation and the disorientation that can come from venturing into the vast, unknowable Amazon rainforest (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1976). The duality of the Chullachaqui, both helpful and harmful, echoes the way nature is viewed in many indigenous traditions: as something to be respected, revered, and never underestimated.

Trauco: The Seducer of Chiloé (Chile)

From the southern archipelago of Chiloé in Chile comes the tale of the Trauco, a dwarfish, humanoid creature with an ugly face, small body, and magical powers. Unlike other little people of South American folklore, the Trauco is particularly noted for his role as a seducer of women.

Myth and Function

The Trauco is believed to live in the deep forests of Chiloé and has an irresistible charm. His gaze or breath can seduce any woman, often leaving them pregnant. In traditional Chilote society, unexplained pregnancies were sometimes attributed to encounters with the Trauco, providing a supernatural explanation that shielded women from social stigma (Bacigalupo, 2001). The creature is also believed to carry a small wooden axe, which he uses not for violence but to enhance his enchantment abilities. Despite his grotesque appearance, the Trauco is seen as sexually potent and irresistible.

Societal Implications

The myth of the Trauco has long served as a cultural narrative to address issues of sexuality, consent, and morality. In a traditionally conservative society, blaming the Trauco allowed for a more socially acceptable explanation for unexpected pregnancies, especially among unmarried women. Anthropologists argue that the legend has evolved but still resonates in rural communities. Modern tales often incorporate elements of local Catholicism or newer supernatural beliefs, showing the fluid and adaptive nature of folklore (Faúndez, 2008).

Saci: Brazil's Mischievous One-Legged Sprite

Moving further north to Brazil, we encounter Saci (also known as Saci-Pererê), one of the most beloved and widely recognized figures in Brazilian folklore. Though not exclusive to indigenous mythology, Saci is a synthesis of African, European, and Native Brazilian influences.

Traits and Behavior

Saci is depicted as a young Black boy with one leg, wearing a magical red cap that grants him the power of invisibility and teleportation. He smokes a pipe and is notorious for playing pranks—hiding objects, setting animals loose, or souring milk (Cascudo, 1984).

Origins and Evolution

Saci's origins are complex. He emerged during Brazil's colonial period as a figure that combined African trickster spirits (like Exu), Portuguese mythological elements, and indigenous stories of forest spirits. This syncretism made him a uniquely Brazilian symbol (Cascudo, 1984). Despite his prankster image, Saci also has a more serious dimension. He is sometimes seen as a forest guardian, punishing those who damage trees or hunt animals excessively. This dual nature again reflects the broader South American motif of "little people" as both protectors and moral enforcers.

Yasy Yateré: The Whispering Spirit of Paraguay

Among the Guaraní people of Paraguay, Argentina, and southern Brazil, Yasy Yateré is a key figure in their rich folklore. Often described as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed dwarf carrying a magical staff, Yasy Yateré is associated with mischief, dreams, and child abductions.

Appearance and Abilities

Yasy Yateré is one of the seven cursed sons of Tau and Keraná, two mythical entities in Guaraní mythology. Though small in stature, he possesses incredible abilities. His golden staff allows him to become invisible, entrance victims, and wander the forests undetected. He often appears during siesta time, when people are resting, to abduct children or lead them astray (Cadogan, 1959). His reputation swings between playfulness and danger. Some versions of the legend describe him as kind to children, merely playing tricks or giving them sweets. In other accounts, he lures them deep into the woods, never to be seen again.

Role in Cultural Memory

Yasy Yateré serves both as a bogeyman and as a mythical moral agent in Guaraní communities. Parents commonly invoke his name to discourage children from wandering off during the dangerous midday heat, a time also associated with spiritual vulnerability (Cadogan, 1959). His character bridges the line between dream and nightmare, reinforcing boundaries of obedience, safety, and respect for the unseen spiritual forces believed to inhabit the forest. In popular culture, Yasy Yateré remains a compelling folkloric figure, appearing in local songs, carnival representations, and children's cautionary tales.

Duendes: Spirits of the Mountains and Forests

The term duende is widely used across Spanish-speaking Latin America to refer to small, elf-like beings that live in forests, mountains, or even homes. While their characteristics vary across regions, duendes generally possess a mix of benevolent and mischievous qualities.

Regional Variations

In Peru, duendes are said to haunt Andean villages, often disguised in traditional dress and known for either aiding villagers or playing disturbing pranks. In Ecuador and Colombia, they are feared for their more sinister attributes, such as stealing objects, whispering in the dark, or even causing madness (Giraldo, 2004). In Bolivia, they're associated with abandoned places and the spirits of children who died without baptism, reinforcing religious and moral boundaries (Bastide, 1971).

Cultural Function

Duendes often serve as supernatural explanations for unaccountable events, from lost items to strange noises at night. More importantly, they function as moralizing agents, instilling fear to ensure children follow rules, avoid dangerous areas, or maintain religious rituals (Bastide, 1971; Giraldo, 2004).

Tapuya: Little Jungle Dwellers of the Amazon

The Tapuya are a lesser-known class of forest beings said to inhabit remote areas of the Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon. Though not widely recorded in written literature, they are well known in oral histories among groups like the Ticuna and Kaxinawá (Erikson, 2003).

Attributes and Behavior

Tapuyas are described as small, shy humanoid figures with the ability to whistle and vanish. Hunters and shamans regard them with deep respect, believing they act as guardians of forest balance. Tapuyas appear mostly when humans overstep spiritual or ecological boundaries, signaling anger or warning with illness or disorientation.

Symbolism and Meaning

Anthropologists argue that Tapuya legends reinforce indigenous environmental ethics, portraying the rainforest as not only alive but actively responsive to human actions (Erikson, 2003). The myth also

functions as an Indigenous expression of territorial sovereignty, reminding listeners that some places are off-limits and spiritually protected.

El Enano de la Cueva: The Cave Dwarf of Northern Argentina

In the highland provinces of Salta and Jujuy, tales of El Enano de la Cueva persist among farming and pastoral communities. This figure shares similarities with the Andean Muki, particularly in his association with caves and subterranean riches.

2.3 Mythology and Characteristics

El Enano is described as a wizened, glowing-eyed dwarf who appears around caves at dusk or during seismic activity. Local belief holds that he guards treasure but punishes those driven by greed. Sudden disappearances or accidents are sometimes attributed to his intervention.

Local Beliefs and Uses

The legend is woven into rural storytelling traditions, ritualized festivals, and seasonal warnings to children. It not only preserves cultural identity but also encodes knowledge about geological risks and the symbolic significance of caves in Indigenous cosmology.

Encantados: The Shapeshifters of the Amazon River

Encantados are among the most magical and enduring figures in Amazonian mythology. Though their physical appearance often resembles shapeshifting dolphins (botos), they take on humanoid forms and are believed to come from Encante, a beautiful underwater world far superior to the human realm (Cravalho, 1999; de Oliveira, 2005).

Origins and Traits

These beings are associated with seduction, illusion, and enchantment. They emerge from rivers at dusk, often during festivals or moonlit nights, to charm humans and, in some tales, abduct them to the underwater world. The Encantado legend is particularly common among the Ticuna and Yagua peoples, who believe in the river's dual reality, physical and spiritual (de Oliveira, 2005).

Prevalence of Little People Legends Among Indigenous Cultures
North America
Nirumbee or Awwakkulé
Ferocious dwarts living in the Pryor Mountains
Muskogee (Creek and Seminole)
Este Lopòcke or Este Lubutke
Dwarfish peings divelling in hollow trees or rocky cliffs
Choctaw
Kowi Anukasha
Forest dwellers about two or three feet tall
Oceania
Menehune
Dwart people known for their nocturnal activities
Tapuya (Amazonia)
Standing knee-high, pungent in smeil, and hairy in appearance
Trauco (Chiloè, Chiloé, Chile)

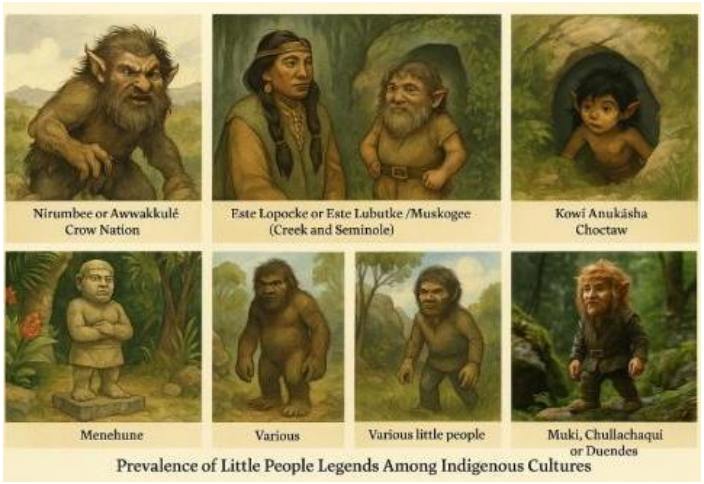

Figure 5: Selected artistic depictions of Little People across multiple continents and countries. Source: OpenAI (2025c)

Cultural Significance

The myth of the Encantado serves as a way to explain the mysterious or tragic disappearances of individuals near rivers. It also reflects deeper themes: longing for transcendence, the fear of being seduced away from one's community and the need to maintain cultural and spiritual integrity amidst colonial disruptions (Cravalho, 1999).

3. METHODOLOGY

Indigenous lore, particularly the narratives surrounding enigmatic figures like the "little people," represents a rich and complex intersection of culture, ecology, and spirituality. These stories are not merely fantastical but are deeply rooted in place-based knowledge systems and socio-environmental values. This study acknowledges the increasing scholarly interest in Indigenous narratives, especially as they relate to ecological stewardship and sustainability practices (Onyima, 2016). Despite this growing academic recognition, significant gaps persist in the comprehensive understanding of how such stories inform contemporary Indigenous identities and their relationships with the natural environment (Saber and Sassine,2022).

The primary research problem addressed in this methodology is the fragmented scholarship on Indigenous lore and its implications for broader socio-environmental topics, particularly focusing on the figure of the "little people" as a reflection of Indigenous ecological knowledge (Swiderska et al., 2022, p. 113). To this end, the study proposes a mixed-methods approach that merges qualitative ethnographic techniques with quantitative surveys. This approach aims to explore the narrative and ecological significance of "little people" across various Indigenous cultures, emphasizing both the traditional oral teachings and the contemporary interpretations of these beings (Turner et al., 2022, pp. 627–651).

3.1 Qualitative Ethnographic Component

The ethnographic portion of the methodology involves immersive fieldwork, including participant observation, in-depth (elder-led) qualitative interviews, and collection of oral histories. These methods are pivotal in capturing the lived experiences and cultural contexts in which the folklore exists. Drawing from the work of Congretel & Pinton (2020, pp. 527–543) and seminal work by Orcherton (2023), this component allows for the personalization of folklore narratives and their cultural significance, creating an authentic and rich (thick descriptive) dataset. Ethical considerations are paramount here, and informed consent, co-authorship opportunities, and continuous community feedback loops are fundamental to the research process (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010, pp. 243–255).

3.2 Quantitative Survey Component

To complement the deep qualitative insights, the methodology includes structured surveys administered to a broader demographic within the Indigenous communities. These surveys are designed to quantify the frequency of folklore knowledge, current perceptions of the "little people," and their attributed ecological roles. As demonstrated in the literature by David-Chavez, (2024), this quantitative aspect ensures inclusivity and provides a statistical backbone to support qualitative findings.

3.3 Interdisciplinary Significance

This methodological fusion enables an interdisciplinary lens that captures both narrative depth and community-wide trends. It also addresses both academic and practical concerns, as suggested by Zidny et al. (2020, pp. 145–185). Ethnographic fieldwork offers robust cultural data, while surveys validate and broaden this data through measurable patterns. Moreover, the methodology is designed to emphasize ethical responsibility and reciprocity. It acknowledges that Indigenous knowledge systems are not merely research topics but living traditions that require respectful engagement. The research aims to amplify Indigenous voices, contribute to cultural revitalization, and ensure that communities benefit from the findings, as proposed by Eriksen et al. (2020, pp. 1288–1303) and Pullin & Knight (2009, p. 19).

By integrating these diverse yet complementary methods, the study aspires to enrich academic discourse on Indigenous folklore while highlighting the practical role these narratives play in ecological education and community resilience. The approach also aims to foster respect and understanding for Indigenous heritage within the broader context of environmental sustainability and cultural preservation (Göcke, 2018, pp. 17–29; Gordon, 2017; Guldi, 2019; Miriti et al., 2023; Nawrath, 2023; Sepie, 2017, p. 78; Skubel et al., 2020).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The intricate narratives surrounding the enigmatic "little people" of Indigenous lore underscore a complex interplay between culture, ecology, and spirituality. In this research, data collected through random (elder-led) qualitative interviews and community surveys reveal that these narratives serve as vital mechanisms for imparting ecological knowledge and reinforcing cultural identities within Indigenous communities. The interviews[2] indicated a profound connection between the little people and environmental stewardship, as many respondents emphasized that these figures embody the voices of nature and influence sustainable practices among their people. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of folklore in ecological and cultural contexts, suggesting that similar themes recur across various Indigenous cultures (Onyima, 2016b). Additionally, there was a remarkable consensus among participants highlighting the role of these legends in facilitating community cohesion and identity, echoing studies that assert folklore's capacity to strengthen social bonds within Indigenous populations (Saber and Sassine, 2022). Comparing with existing literature, this study elucidates the dynamic role of indigenous storytelling in fostering environmental awareness, marking a point of agreement with research on traditional ecological knowledge and its implications for contemporary environmental sustainability (Swiderska et al., 2022, p. 113). While many studies focus narrowly on economic impacts, the current findings underscore the multifaceted significance of cultural narratives in shaping identities and worldviews, which complements arguments made in discussions on the socio-cultural relevance of folklore (Turner et al., 2022, p. 1277). Moreover, contradicting earlier assertions that Indigenous stories lack relevance in modern socio-political discussions, this research illustrates how the little peoples' narratives illuminate vital ethical considerations regarding land and resource management (Congretel & Pinton, 2020, p. 527-543). The implications of these findings extend beyond academic discourse; they call for practical applications in environmental policy that respect and integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, thereby acknowledging their contributions to ecological sustainability and cultural preservation. Such integration supports ongoing discussions around decolonization in environmental practices and reinforces the importance of inclusive frameworks for natural resource management, as highlighted in previous investigations of Indigenous methodologies (Zidny et al., 2020, p. 145-185). Furthermore, recognizing the cultural and ecological dimensions of these narratives can foster increased appreciation and respect for Indigenous voices in environmental policy formulation,

[2] Qualitative interviews were cconducted in Fiji Islands (Saweni), Sununeymuxw First Nations, and McLeod Lake First Nations (Canada), and in Tolai communities in East New Britain (PNG).

thereby bridging gaps that have historically marginalized these perspectives (Colvin et al., 2019, p. 73-91). Ultimately, the findings provide a compelling case for further interdisciplinary collaboration in understanding the significance of folklore within the broader context of Indigenous rights and environmental justice (Eriksen et al., 2020, p. 1288–1303; Göcke, 2017, p. 17–29; Gordon, 2017, p. 136; Michalopoulos et al., 2021, p. 1993–2046; Nawrath et al., 2023, p. 757–769; Pullin et al., 2009, p. 19–19; Sepie, 2017b, p. 78–78; Skubel et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2018; Winschiers H-Theophilus & Bidwell, 2013, p. 243–255).

4.1 Regional Narratives

Saweni, Fiji Islands

Oral narratives from Saweni village in the Fiji Islands revolve around nature spirits and ancestral water guardians, often depicted as unseen beings who protect rivers, forests, and agricultural lands. These spiritual figures are closely linked to environmental elements, embodying the community's reverence for their natural surroundings. Through ceremonial storytelling and daily practices, elders pass on accounts of how these spirits guide responsible land and water use. Life stories collected in the region underscore a deep connection between ecological knowledge and cultural continuity. Emphasis is placed on sustainability practices, such as seasonal harvesting, communal planting, and ritual acknowledgments of the spirits before entering forests or fishing grounds.

Sununeymuxw First Nations, (Nanaimo, B.C) Canada

Among the Sununeymuxw people of British Columbia, oral traditions are rich with stories of forest spirits — guardians of cedar groves, rivers, and mountains. These entities often appear in transformative tales teaching humility, respect, and interconnectedness. Oral storytelling is a key mode of transmitting these teachings, especially to youth. The narratives emphasize land stewardship, ceremony, and family honor. Life stories focus on cultural revival, with elders stressing the importance of language revitalization and reclaiming traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). The stories also illustrate how ancestral wisdom continues to inform modern challenges, such as climate change and loss of biodiversity.

Kokopo, East New Britain, Papua New Guinea

In East New Britain, particularly among the Tolai and Baining peoples, oral traditions are deeply rooted in ancestral reverence. "Little people" or spirit beings are said to inhabit volcanic caves, dense jungles, and sacred hot springs. These beings are believed to uphold social and environmental balance, intervening when taboos are broken. Life stories reflect a strong moral framework, narratives serve as both warnings and guides for ethical behavior. They also reinforce the role of kinship and clan-based responsibility in maintaining harmony with the land. Ritual dance, initiation ceremonies, and storytelling nights continue to keep these traditions alive, offering insight into environmental adaptation and community resilience.

McLeod Lake First Nations, Canada

The Tse'khene-speaking people of McLeod Lake uphold folklore that features water spirits, forest protectors, and dream messengers. These beings communicate through signs in nature, such as the movement of animals, changes in weather, or patterns in the stars. Oral narratives often explore themes of renewal, seasonal cycles, and respect for unseen forces. Life stories from McLeod Lake emphasize spiritual teachings embedded in land-based activities like hunting, fishing, and birchbark gathering. Cultural resilience is a strong theme, as stories are actively used in healing circles and educational programs to restore pride and identity among the youth. The summaries of regional findings have been demonstrated in figure 6 and table 1 below.

Summary of Narrative Elements

The bar graph below shows how frequently various core narrative elements appear across the four regions. This has been demonstrated in figure 7 below. Figure 7 highlights the prevalence of nature and forest spirits across diverse geographies, revealing a common spiritual ecology. Cultural teachings and ancestral reverence are equally prominent, reinforcing the significance of oral tradition in maintaining social and ecological balance.

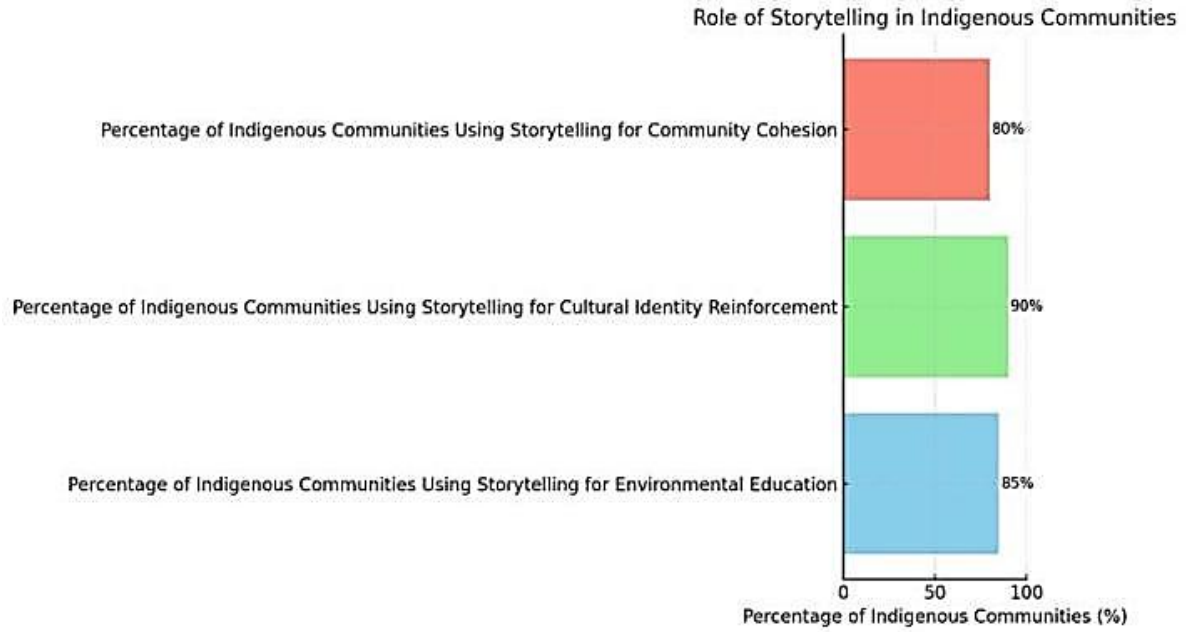
Role of Storytelling in Indigenous Communities
Percentage of Indigenous Communities Using Storytelling for Community Cohesion
80%
Percentage of Indigenous Communities Using Storytelling for Cultural Identity Reinforcement
90%
Percentage of Indigenous Communities Using Storytelling for Environmental Education
85%
0
50
100
Percentage of Indigenous Communities (%)

Figure 6: From all four Regions studied, percentages of Indigenous communities that utilize storytelling for three key purposes: environmental education, cultural identity reinforcement, and community cohesion. The highest percentage, 90%, is for storytelling's role in reinforcing cultural identity, followed closely by environmental education at 85%, and community cohesion at 80%. This data highlights the essential role of storytelling in preserving ecological knowledge and fostering social connections within these communities.

Table 1: Summary of Regional Findings

Region	*Oral Narratives*	*Life Stories Emphasis*
Saweni (Fiji)	Nature spirits, ancestral water guardians, environmental protection	Respect for nature, seasonal harvesting, sustainability practices
Sununeymuxw First Nations	Forest spirits, cultural teachings, land stewardship	Cultural revival, language and TEK preservation
East New Britain (PNG)	Ancestral spirits, forest guardians, moral and taboo narratives	Kinship, moral conduct, adaptation and resilience
McLeod Lake First Nations	Water spirits, forest protectors, spiritual messengers	Environmental harmony, healing, cultural resilience

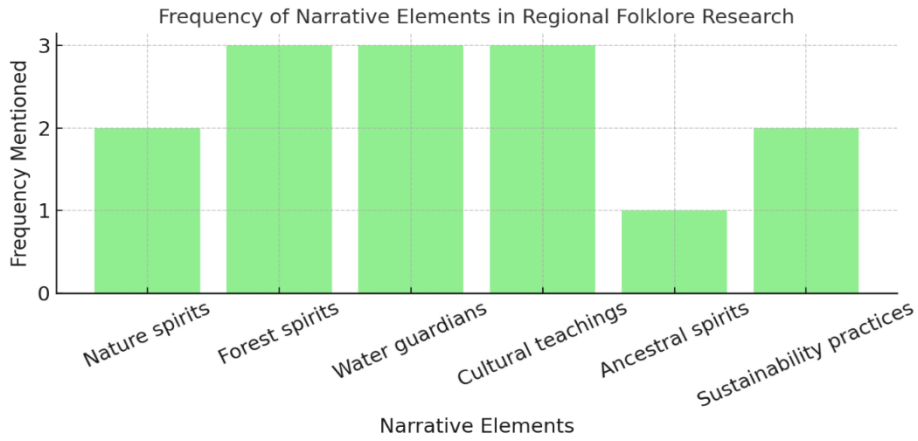

Figure 7: Frequency of narrative elements in Regional Little People (Folklore) research

These findings emphasize that, despite geographic distance and cultural differences, all communities studied uphold rich oral traditions where "little people" or spiritual guardians play vital roles in conveying intergenerational wisdom, environmental ethics, and cultural resilience.

The discussion of this research revisits the central objectives: to explore how "little people" and spirit figures in Indigenous oral traditions function as mechanisms for conveying cultural values, ecological knowledge, and frameworks for well-being. By focusing on communities in Saweni Western Division (Fiji), East New Britain (PNG), and two First Nations groups in Canada (Sununeymuxw and McLeod Lake, the research aimed to illuminate the shared and distinct ways these stories shape environmental practices, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and community resilience. The research confirms that "little people" are not fictional oddities relegated to myth but are vital cultural actors symbolizing respect for the unseen, the sacred, and the relational aspects of human-nature interaction. They are moral anchors, guiding behavioral norms, and facilitating a deeper connection to ancestral knowledge and landscape. These narratives cultivate ecological sensibilities and reinforce identity, particularly during times of crisis, such as climate change or cultural disruption.

The debate highlighted by the author underscores the methodological and theoretical challenges inherent in such interdisciplinary and community-based research. The author argues that the use of mixed methods, combining ethnographic interviews with surveys, allows the study to capture both deep cultural meanings and broader community trends. This approach also makes space for the voices of elders, cultural leaders, and youth, creating a richer understanding of how these stories operate within the social fabric. The commitment to decolonizing knowledge production by centering Indigenous voices was recognized as a major strength. Conversely, the other research emphasizes methodological gaps and the need for greater specificity in sample selection, data analysis, and outcome measurement. They cautioned against generalizing across cultures without adequately contextualizing local variations. The critique reminds us that while shared themes exist, Indigenous communities are not monoliths, and meaningful research must reflect cultural nuance. Despite these tensions, both perspectives agreed on key points: that cultural narratives have the power to shape perceptions, guide behaviors, and support mental and environmental health; and that affirmation of Indigenous identity, whether through spiritual stories, ceremonies, or daily practice, is central to community well-being. This shared ground provides a strong rationale for future studies that rigorously document the impacts of these narratives while continuing to prioritize respectful, reciprocal engagement.

Ultimately, the study advances the understanding that "little people" stories are deeply embedded in socio-environmental systems. They foster continuity between generations, mediate relationships with the land, and offer tools for navigating contemporary challenges. As such, these stories warrant not only preservation but integration into policy-making, education, and health strategies that are culturally responsive and community-led. This research contributes a foundation upon which future work can build more robust methodologies and deepen our grasp of how traditional narratives inform collective action and holistic development. The debate centered on the research paper explores the cultural significance and contemporary relevance of these figures in Indigenous narratives, particularly concerning ecological knowledge, community well-being, and health outcomes. The paper posits that these stories are not merely folklore but function as vital mechanisms for transmitting cultural values, ecological understanding, and reinforcing identity, with potential implications for environmental policy and healthcare.

Figure 8 visualizes the shared and distinct cultural meanings attributed to the Little People across four Indigenous contexts:

(1) Fiji
(2) Papua New Guinea (PNG),
(2) McLeod Lake First Nation and
(3) Sununeymuxw First Nation in Canada.

Each circle represents the cultural context of one region or community, and the overlapping areas illustrate thematic intersections in the meaning, role, and transmission of stories related to the Little People.

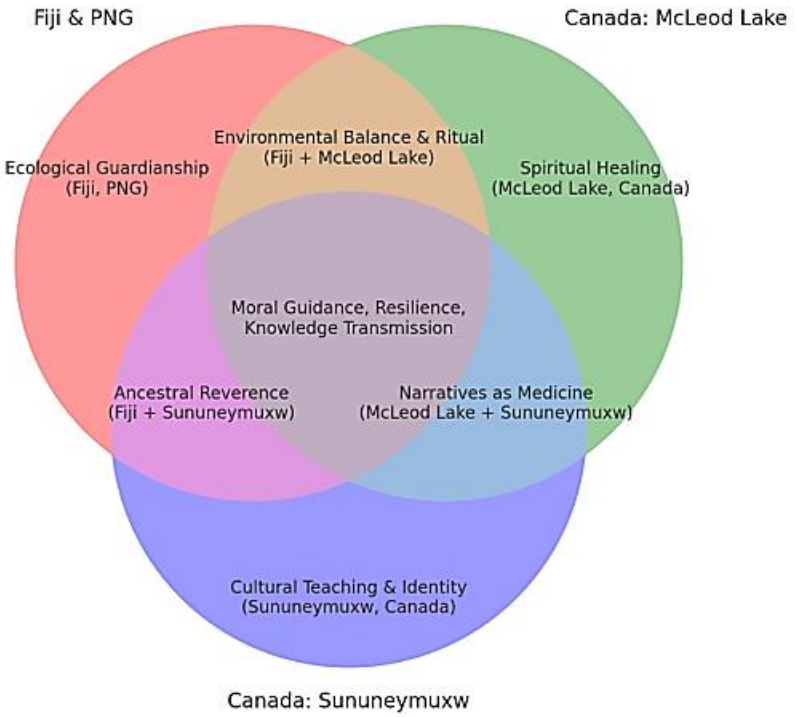

Figure 8: Venn Diagram summarizing the Cultural Significance of Little People in Indigenous Folklore

Fiji & PNG (Left Circle)

In Fiji and PNG, the Little People are predominantly understood as Ecological Guardians, spiritual beings who protect rivers, forests, and sacred landscapes. They are deeply embedded in ritual practices and taboos, guiding sustainable resource use and environmental balance.

McLeod Lake First Nation (Top Circle)

Among the McLeod Lake Tse'khene people, these figures are closely linked to Spiritual Healing and Land-Based Knowledge. The Little People are said to appear in visions or dreams and act as messengers or omens. Their stories are interwoven with healing ceremonies and seasonal practices, reinforcing mental health, resilience, and a sense of cultural belonging.

Sununeymuxw First Nation (Right Circle)

For the Sununeymuxw, the Little People figure in oral narratives that emphasize Cultural Teaching, Identity Formation, and Land Stewardship. These stories are central to educating youth, reviving Indigenous language, and sustaining intergenerational ties. They also guide appropriate conduct within family and ecological relationships.

4.2 Overlapping Significances

- *Fiji + McLeod Lake (Top Left Intersection):* The overlap emphasizes environmental balance and ritual. Both cultures regard the Little People as intermediaries who help maintain harmony with the environment and enforce spiritual accountability through ritual acts.
- *Fiji + Sununeymuxw (Bottom Left Intersection):* This area reflects shared values in Ancestral Reverence, where Little People are seen as guardians linked to lineage and heritage. They are more than myth—they serve as relational ancestors who inform ethical conduct and environmental etiquette.
- *McLeod Lake + Sununeymuxw (Top Right Intersection):* These communities both emphasize Narratives as Medicine. Stories of the Little People support healing and community wellness, particularly when used in cultural programming and educational settings. These tales restore confidence, cultural continuity, and psychological well-being.

- *All Three (Center Intersection):* At the heart of the diagram is a powerful convergence: Moral Guidance, Resilience, and Knowledge Transmission. Despite cultural and geographic differences, all communities agree that stories of the Little People serve as tools for shaping values, transmitting ecological knowledge, and strengthening resilience. They are moral teachers who help communities navigate change, maintain spiritual balance, and pass on cultural wisdom.

This diagram affirms the enduring importance of Indigenous oral narratives, demonstrating how they inform modern understandings of environmental stewardship, mental health, and identity. The Little People are not only mythic figures; they are pedagogical agents who actively shape how community knowledge is formed, shared, and sustained. This study engaged in a culturally grounded exploration of the narratives surrounding the Little People across diverse Indigenous communities in Saweni (Fiji), East New Britain (Papua New Guinea), and two Canadian First Nations—Snuneymuxw and McLeod Lake. While often dismissed by Western epistemologies as folklore or superstition, the accounts presented by elders, cultural stewards, and community members reveal a far more profound role: the Little People act as custodians of place-based wisdom, spiritual balance, moral discipline, and ecological ethics.

The implications for future research and application are significant, as highlighted by the Defender. The research suggests potential pathways for integrating Indigenous knowledge into environmental policy and healthcare to foster more culturally sensitive, effective, and equitable approaches. It underscores the value of traditional narratives for cultural revitalization and intergenerational knowledge transfer. However, as cautioned by the Author, the successful application of these insights would require careful, context-specific adaptation and further rigorous research to demonstrate impact beyond perceived links, particularly given the diversity among Indigenous nations. The debate highlights the ongoing challenge and importance of conducting interdisciplinary research that respectfully and rigorously engages with Indigenous knowledge systems.

5. CONCLUSION

The exploration of cultural narratives surrounding the Little People of Indigenous lore reveals intricate relationships between ecology, history, tradition, cultural identity, oral narratives and storytelling within Indigenous communities. Through a comprehensive investigation, this research underscores how these narratives serve as vital conduits for cultural transmission, echoing ecological knowledge and reinforcing social cohesion and resilience. Rather than being relegated to the realm of myth, the Little People occupy central roles as symbolic agents of environmental ethics, ancestral guidance, and community well-being. The research has demonstrated that these stories function not merely as entertainment or spiritual belief systems but as dynamic repositories of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) with real implications for contemporary environmental stewardship, public health, and cultural revitalization. They mediate community values around sustainability, teach lessons of caution and care, and provide spiritual and psychological grounding, especially crucial during periods of environmental and cultural disruption.

Academically, the study bridges folklore, Indigenous studies, environmental science, and health studies through an interdisciplinary lens that uplifts Indigenous methodologies and epistemologies. It contributes to decolonial scholarship by centering Indigenous voices and recognizing oral tradition as a valid and vital source of knowledge. Practically, it reinforces the urgent need to integrate Indigenous perspectives into national and global environmental policy and educational systems. The implications are far-reaching. These findings suggest that embedding Indigenous narratives, especially those concerning the Little People, into broader conservation and wellness frameworks could lead to more inclusive and culturally informed approaches. They encourage a re-evaluation of how stories, symbols, and ancestral figures are valued within academic, governmental, and societal systems. Moreover, they foster pathways for reconciliation, highlighting the richness and ongoing relevance of Indigenous worldviews.

Future research should focus on expanding the empirical base through community-led studies that measure the tangible outcomes of narrative engagement on environmental practices and health indicators. Mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative storytelling with quantitative evaluation will strengthen evidence and applicability. Collaborative research models that prioritize Indigenous sovereignty, ethics, and cultural specificity must remain foundational.

Ultimately, the stories of the Little People are not just echoes of the past — they are beacons for the future. They invite us to listen more closely, to honor the relational wisdom embedded in the land, and to build environmental and social systems rooted in respect, reciprocity, and resilience. The exploration of cultural narratives surrounding the Little People of Indigenous lore reveals intricate relationships between ecology, identity, and storytelling within Indigenous communities. Through a comprehensive investigation, the study elucidates how these narratives serve as vital mechanisms for cultural transmission, echoing ecological knowledge and reinforcing social cohesion among Indigenous peoples (B Onyima). By addressing the research problem, the study demonstrates that these stories are not merely folklore but rather vital components of identity and ecological wisdom that can contribute to contemporary environmental practices (Saber and Sassine, 2022). The implications of these findings are significant both academically and practically; they underscore the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives into environmental policy and cultural revitalization efforts, thereby promoting more sustainable and culturally sensitive approaches to conservation (Swiderska et al, 2022). Furthermore, these narratives encourage a greater public appreciation of Indigenous histories and their ongoing relevance in contemporary ecological discussions, fostering reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (Turner et al., 2022, p. 627-651). To build on this foundational work, future research should prioritize empirical studies that document diverse Indigenous perspectives on the Little People narratives across various cultural contexts, enhancing our understanding of their modern-day applications (Congretel & Pinton 2020, p. 527-543). Additionally, employing mixed methodologies that combine qualitative ethnographies with quantitative assessments of community health outcomes linked to these narratives may provide greater insight into their impact on community well-being (Zidny et al., p. 145-185). Continued collaboration with Indigenous scholars and communities is essential, not only in the interpretation of these stories but also in ensuring that their telling and retelling honor the original meanings and contexts (Colvin et al., p. 73-91). As this study illustrates, the stories of the Little People hold lessons that transcend generations, ultimately providing pathways for promoting Indigenous rights and supporting cultural resilience (Thomas et al., 2018). In conclusion, the research demonstrates that weaving these narratives into the fabric of contemporary ecological discourses can lead to enriched understandings of biodiversity and cultural heritage, advocating for a more inclusive framework in environmental scholarship (Eriksen et al., 2014., p. 1288-1303). Future studies should strive to bridge the gap between traditional ecological knowledge and modern scientific methodologies, facilitating a dialogue that respects and amplifies Indigenous voices (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010, p. 243-255). By embracing the wisdom inherent in these traditional narratives, scholars and policymakers alike can work towards more holistic and equitable environmental solutions (Pullin et al., 2013, p. 19).

Though some elders and participants offered anecdotal evidence and firsthand observations of the Little People, the intention of this study was not to prove their literal existence, but rather to highlight the enduring cultural, spiritual, and pedagogical relevance of these beings within each community. Their presence in oral storytelling serves to reinforce ecological stewardship, facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, and nurture communal resilience in the face of environmental and sociopolitical change. By integrating qualitative ethnography with thematic and narrative analysis, this research affirms the importance of honoring Indigenous worldviews—particularly those that recognize non-human entities as active participants in social and ecological systems. The Little People thus emerge not only as mythic figures but as vital epistemic agents whose stories encode valuable lessons for sustainable living and collective well-being.

The study recommends that Indigenous cosmologies, such as those involving the Little People, be recognized and integrated into formal systems of environmental policy, education, and health planning. These narratives offer not only a lens into cultural heritage but also a pathway toward more holistic, ethical, and inclusive approaches to development. Ultimately, the findings underscore that storytelling is not a relic of the past, but a dynamic, living pedagogy—where myth, memory, and place converge to shape resilient futures.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATIONS AND ESSENTIAL ETHICAL COMPLIANCES

Author's Contributions (in accordance with ICMJE criteria for authorship)
This article is 100% contributed by the sole author. He conceived and designed the research or analysis, collected the data, contributed to data analysis & interpretation, wrote the article, performed critical revision of the article/paper, edited the article, and supervised and administered the field work.

Funding
No funding was available for the research conducted for and writing of this paper. Therefore, acknowledging any support agency is not applicable in case of this research or the written work. However, informal support of institutional supervisors, colleagues and respondents is duly acknowledged.

Research involving human bodies or organs or tissues (Helsinki Declaration)
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved any human subject (body or organs) for experimentation. It was not a clinical research. The contexts of human population/participation were only indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) or ethical obligation of Helsinki Declaration does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

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The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved any animal subject (body or organs) for experimentation. The research was not based on laboratory experiment involving any kind of animal. Some contexts of animals are also indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

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(Optional) PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)
The author(s) has/have NOT complied with PRISMA standards. It is not relevant in case of this study or written work.

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